

REPORT ON HOUSING

COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC HEALTH RELATIONS

There exists in this country a continuous tendency toward housing congestion, with all of its attendant dangers. In 1921 only 24.4 per cent of the people living in 257 American cities were housed in apartment houses; in 1928, homes for 388,678 families were provided in new buildings in these cities, and 53.7 per cent of these were in apartment houses.

The problem of the housing of the masses presents hygienic as well as economic aspects. In 1929, the municipality of Paris, in deference to the same principle, added hygienists to its City Planning Commission, which had previously been composed of architects and lay officials. At the President's Conference on Home Building, held in Washington in 1931, Professor Rosenau made a report on Housing and Health, to which were appended notes on the "Relation of Housing and Health" by Dr. Haven Emerson.

The Committee's cooperation has been requested by various civic organizations interested in the establishment and maintenance of housing standards consistent with health. Conferences have been held with spokesmen for the State Housing Board, the Regional Plan Committee, the Housing Committee of the United Neighborhood Houses, and the Housing Association of New York, at which the defense of sound regulations already in existence as well as future legislative proposals were discussed from the medical standpoint.

Such important bodies as the Medical Research Council of England, the United States Children's Bureau, and the Committee on Regional Plan of New York and its Environs have occupied themselves with the investigation of the housing and health problem from various angles. The literature on the subject is extensive. The Director of the National Housing Association supplied a comprehensive list of references of interest and value.

The Regional Plan Committee of New York sought to lay secure foundations for its housing recommendations by the citation of medical authority in proof that the absence of sunlight was an important factor in the causation of rickets, that sunshine is the most active known stimulant for the enhancement of bodily resistance to tuberculosis, that sunlight is an effective general bactericidal agent, and that even daylight acts in the same way though at a much slower rate; and that if sunlight is permitted to approach and to warm one or two sides of a building it favors desirable ventilation by inducing a gentle circulation of air by reason of the difference in local temperature which it creates.

Dr. Emerson calls attention in his report to the common failure of writers upon housing and health to recognize the limitations of the statistical method when applied to the questions at issue, and to errors of argument and reasoning which are due to the lack of control of conditions necessary for a basis of comparisons; "only when the race, age, sex, occupational, economic, and intelligence or adaptability level of population groups are taken into consideration, can valid conclusions be drawn from the almost universal experience that where housing is of a poor quality in a constructional, spatial or sanitary sense, high death rates, high disease incidence, and poor child development, prevail."

Reports purport to show that the health averages of entire neighborhood populations have been lifted through housing projects in London which began with the abolition of unwholesome slums and ended with the replacement of the inhabitants of the slums on the land which they had previously occupied, in sanitary tenement blocks erected by the local government authority. In these cases morbidity reports for definite population groups cover periods before and after housing treatment.

An attempt by the Medical Research Council of England to correlate social conditions (including poverty and the

domiciliary conditions with which poverty is associated) with acute rheumatism was inconclusive with respect to the significance, in this particular disease, of basement and ground floor locations, congestion, ventilation or lighting. From a study of housing conditions in relation to the incidence and fatality of measles, however, the interesting conclusion was reached that while among crowded tenement quarters, housing a working class population, measles is essentially a disease of children under school age, in working class and middle class families who live in houses of the single entry type the disease is predominantly one of children of ages five to ten and that in country districts also the disease tends to be one of school children of ages five to ten. In the language of the report, "certain types of tenement buildings may contribute to a high death rate for measles by exposing to infection a larger number of people at the earlier years than is the case in an area where the cottage type of house predominates."

"In the categories of communicable and infectious disease, and nutrition or growth and development, there is much circumstantial evidence and some quite suggestive correlation of a statistical nature to the effect that there are limits of crowding in room, house, lot, and block beyond which people of low economic levels, of mediocre intelligence, cannot be permitted to occupy houses or apartments."—(Haven Emerson).

A study by the Scottish Board of Health of maternal mortality in Aberdeen, over a period of ten years, failed to reveal any definite relationship between environmental conditions and puerperal mortality; in this study cleanliness of house, size of house, crowdedness of individual houses and congested areas were separately considered and no significant association of any of them with puerperal mortality was ascertained. On the other hand Dr. Emerson quotes studies by the Children's Bureau, by Newsholme in England, and by Walker in Detroit as consistently showing "a close correlation between loss of life from childbirth and in the first year of infant life and the

number of persons per room in tenement housing and particularly with the number sleeping in the same room with the infant . . . it is the use more than the construction arrangement and equipment of buildings that determines their harmful influence on life. Regardless of race stock, the more persons there are per room, and the more families there are per dwelling, i.e., the greater the block, lot, and room crowding the higher the infant mortality rate."

The director of the nursing bureau of the New York City Department of Health in a discussion of the effects of present economic conditions recently said that "there seems to have been little or no increase in illness as a result of economic conditions. However, every nurse who visits homes affected returns with a report of extreme nervousness and worry on the part of all members of families so affected.—One of the greatest causes of this nervousness, we find, has been the crowding of large families together under one roof."

The Committee is not at present in a position to undertake the original investigation of problems relating to housing, which include questions in biology, physiology, neurology and mental hygiene, as well as several phases of social economics. The Committee, however, believes that it is incumbent on the medical profession to take an active part in shaping protective housing legislation. In order to perform this duty in an intelligent and effectual manner the profession must familiarize itself with a great body of recorded observation and keep in touch with current experimentation on the following subjects:

A. The relation of light to health

1. animal experimentation
2. human experience
 - a. domestic
 - b. clinical

B. The relation of air space and ventilation to health

1. lowered resistance to disease (loss of immunity)

- C. The influence of types of housing and of house and room crowding on the spread of communicable disease
 - 1. theoretical considerations
 - 2. field findings in various diseases, individually considered
- D. The influence of crowded housing on nervous and mental health
 - 1. noise and repose
- E. The essential sanitary equipment of dwelling places
 - 1. water supply
 - 2. sewage
 - 3. disposal of wastes
 - 4. preservation of food
 - 5. cleanliness
- F. Economic conditions that affect housing standards in a manner prejudicial to health
 - 1. wage standards and periodic unemployment
 - 2. rents as affected by
 - a. methods of construction
 - b. methods of financing
- G. Progress in housing reform
 - 1. building laws affecting safety
 - 2. zoning laws
 - 3. sanitary regulations
 - 4. slum clearance projects
 - 5. model housing projects (city, suburban, and rural types)
 - a. producing normal return on capital (business basis)
 - b. producing *less than* normal return (philanthropic)
 - 6. state aid and participation
 - a. tax exemption
 - b. municipal construction

The range of these studies is such that if means were available the Committee could easily utilize to advantage the services of an additional staff; lacking such assistance the activities of the Committee, if continued, must necessarily be limited, but the Committee hopes nevertheless to be able to collaborate helpfully with responsible civic organizations which, while relatively inactive at the moment, are likely to renew their activities on an increasing scale when general business conditions improve; such

organizations, according to their own testimony, will always be in need of medical guidance and support. There is no doubt, however, that the present tenement house law of New York State should be amended in at least two particulars:

1. to eliminate the community toilets in tenements and provide a separate toilet for each family. The present provision permits conditions which are not in the best interest of public health.

2. to eliminate the existence of "railroad" tenements by which rooms are permitted as living quarters whose sole connections are with rooms having an outside window. This leads to overcrowding, darkness and breathing of vitiated air.

The establishment of a Housing Section by the American Public Health Association would no doubt intensify the interest of public health officials in the housing problem, and the creation of such a section has been suggested to the President of that organization.

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